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ABSTRACT

Life history interviews with 22 elderly Indians (16 women, 6 men, aged 60 to 81) in Phoenix suggest that for many of them the Indian Senior Center offers a sociable arena where they assume activist roles, directly addressing aging-related issues concerning health care, transportation, and emotional stress management. They engage in fund-raising activities in order to attend national and regional aging policy conferences; offer a nutrition program to new mothers; serve on local advisory boards for health services, transportation planning, and Area Aging Offices; visit nearby reservation nursing homes; serve as VISTA volunteers; and run for local school boards. Among those who remain in the city, aging does not necessarily lead to more conservative political attitudes and behaviors. Although many of the interviewees first came to Phoenix to attend boarding school during the time when government policy stressed regimentation and acculturation, some now support the school's continued operation for pragmatic reasons: the school is located on an enormously valuable property in the central business district. Thus, life history data indicate that the aging process is characterized for elderly urban Indians living in metropolitan Phoenix, by increasing pragmatism, stability of political orientation, and the potential for heightened interest and participation in political affairs. (Author/MH)

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A NEW CHAPTER:

ELDERLY URBAN INDIANS AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN PHOENIX

by

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Presented at the symposium, Life Histories and the Cultural Dimensions of Aging, organized by Marjorie Schweitzer, Department of Sociology-Anthropology, Oklahoma State University. 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, Illinois. November 17-20, 1983.

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ABSTRACT

Some elderly Indians choose to remain living in the city rather than seeking the often noted respite that the reservation offers. Life history interviews among 22 Indian Senior Citizen Center participants in Phoenix suggest that for many of the city's elderly Indians, the Center offers a sociable arena where, for the first time in their lives, they assume activist roles, directly addressing aging-related issues concerning health care, transportation, and emotional stress management. The relationship between aging and changes in political orientation is examined, along with changes in levels of political interest and participatory behavior as revealed in these life history data. Acknowledging competition for resource assistance within the sizeable Phoenix area retirement population, the nature of elderly Indian activism is discussed in terms of its material, psychological, and ethnic boundary maintenance consequences.

Introduction

After I had agreed to act as interviewer for the Phoenix Indian Center's Oral History Project in January 1982, the Center's director suggested that I could meet prospective project participants at that week's Senior Citizens Fry Bread Sale. An every-other-Friday affair at the Center, the sale would be a perfect occasion to offer myself for inspection, I was told, and to begin what would turn out to be a lengthy process of gaining acceptance among the Seniors. The Center occupies a converted church complex, and the Seniors hold their fry bread sales in the property's single largest space, the former recreation hall. That particular Friday, the hall was packed with noon-hour visitors--not to inspect me, of course, but to eat chili and fry bread and to be entertained by a group of Southern Plains fancy dancers who were touring the Southwest on a self-proclaimed consciousness-raising mission, addressing the deplorable conditions facing Indian prisoners in the New Mexico and Arizona state corrections institutions.

Consciousness-raising? Prison conditions? Senior Citizens? It seemed more than a little incongruous to me at the time, and I suspected that the highly charged speeches that accompanied the dancing were endured for the sake of the music and spectacle. Nearly two years, and hours of life history interviews later, however, I am convinced otherwise. These elderly urban Indians are politically interested, and politically active. For many, it is only relatively recently that this activism has surfaced.[1]

The question to be addressed in this paper is one of how these apparently recent changes in political attitudes and participatory behavior fit into patterns evident in life history data obtained from elderly urban Indian informants. As dimensions of the aging process, have these individuals become more "liberal" or "conservative" in their attitudes as they have grown older? Have they become less interested in political affairs as they have grown

older, as part of a general process of "disengagement" from active involvement in social life? What sense can be made of the participation among elderly urban Indians in community organizations as supporters, as office-holders, and as leaders? In a final section of the paper, I turn to a broader question concerning the nature of compiling life history data, and how this undertaking affects our ability to use such data in addressing questions that are pertinent to the study of the political and ethnic dimensions of aging.

The PIC Urban Indian Oral History Project

The Phoenix Indian Center (PIC) is a private, non-profit pan-tribal organization that purports to deliver social services to the nearly 20,000 off-reservation Indians who live in metropolitan Phoenix. In January 1982, PIC received a small grant from the Arizona State Library Association to record and transcribe a series of open-ended oral history interviews with volunteers from the Senior Citizens Program at the Center, and with residents of the American Indian Nursing Home in nearby Laveen, Arizona. While PIC has been in existence since 1947, it was as recently as 1978 that it assumed contractual responsibility for administering a city-sponsored Senior Citizens Program for urban Indians. The Center's administration of this contract has not been without controversy, as many of the Seniors assert that they are frequently exploited for the benefit of the administrators. Indeed, the grant application that sought and gained extremely modest funding for the Oral History Project was prepared and submitted by the Center's development officer--in effect "volunteering" the services of Program participants--without consulting or seeking the consent of any prospective volunteers, or the Program's staff director.

This feeling of exploitation is also due, in part, to an editorial climate promoted by the local media catering to a large public appetite for stock

photos and video images of little old Indian ladies dishing up chili, along with dramatic close-ups of the patient, traditional craftsperson at work. Thus, the Senior Citizens Program is perhaps the most widely recognized of the many activities the Center sponsors, although its participants feel largely vulnerable to the demands of better funded programs.

I was contacted after the funding for the Oral History Project had been secured. Given the circumstances surrounding the Project's initial conceptualization, the first order of business for me was to introduce to the Seniors as a discussion topic the question of what sort of "oral history project," if any, they would be interested in undertaking. The term "oral history" is a somewhat misleading label for the interviews that have taken place, as the themes that emerged from conversations all focused on the individual life experiences of these elderly Indians living in Phoenix. They talked about their early lives growing up on reservations (for the most part, but not exclusively, in the Southwest), how they first came to Phoenix, whether they have stayed in the city continuously since first coming there, their families, ties that they maintain with their home communities, and recollections about places in the city that are significant to them. Included for the present discussion are interviews with 22 individuals conducted over the past 2 years. Tape cassettes and transcripts from most of these interviews are available at the PIC library.

The 16 women and 6 men whose life histories form the basis for the present discussion range in age from 60 to 81, and, at the time of the interviews had lived in the metropolitan area for as little as 6 months duration, and as long as several decades. All of these individuals had been born on a reservation somewhere in the western U. S., although, collectively, their tribal backgrounds reflect the considerable diversity that is present in all

age categories among the urban Phoenix Indian population. The seven nursing home residents are each past some disability threshold that has required their placement in a highly structured health care environment. The 15 people contacted through the Phoenix Indian Center's Senior Citizen Program are all more or less free from disabilities that would prevent them from maintaining a household, although 9 of the 15 live with spouses, children, or grandchildren, and four others live in the immediate vicinity of close relatives (i.e., down the block, or in the same apartment complex).

Among the more intriguing dimensions of the aging process revealed by these life history data is the recurrent theme of political activism. For many of the city's elderly Indians, the Phoenix Indian Senior Center offers a sociable arena where, for the first time in their lives, they assume active roles in addressing aging-related issues concerning health care, transportation, and emotional stress management. They engage in fund-raising activities to send themselves to national and regional aging policy conferences. They offer a nutrition education program to new mothers and their infants. They serve on local advisory boards for health services, transportation planning, and Area Aging offices. Their group visits to nearby reservation nursing homes and day-care centers for the elderly are planned and discussed afterwards as "therapeutic" for their sheltered-care hosts. One individual has been caring for several of her grandchildren while their mothers look for work in other towns, and the children's experiences in their new school prompted the grandmother to run for a seat on the local school district board. And, of course, they have their fortnightly fry bread sales, often accompanied by some guest speaker or entertainment. Understandably, the nursing home residents in Laveen are less active. One resident, a former judge, reads the newspaper every morning over the public address system. Another, who has since passed away, was leading the other residents in a daily

"reality orientation" session when I first met her, despite her blindness and a host of severely disabling infirmities.

Activism is not simply a matter of participatory behavior. It also reveals aspects of personal political orientation and levels of interest in political affairs, changes in which are often noted as dimensions of the aging process (Cutler 1977). In the case of elderly Indians living in Phoenix, documenting the nature of these changes can lead to a re-evaluation of the relationship between aging and conservativism, and a further look at the gradual process of so-called "disengagment" from active involvement with social life. Moreover, in a metropolitan area like Phoenix, which has a sizeable elderly population, the ethnic boundary maintenance consequences of political activism may help to account for a new chapter added to the life histories of those elderly urban Indians who have chosen to remain in the city, rather than seeking the respite that the reservation is often said to provide.

Aging and Conservativism

Many of our assumptions about the political attitudes and behaviors of older people are a product of broader societal stereotypes that portray the elderly as "set in their ways". Younger urban Indians subject their urban elders to stigmatization on the basis of a relatively stricter adherence by elders to traditionalist values. Ironically, long-time elderly urban Indian residents are often regarded by their reservation counterparts as "less Indian," having changed their ways as a result of living in the city. Do urban Indians become more conservative as they grow older, as stereotypes held by their younger counterparts suggest? Do they become "less Indian" in the sense that they become less traditionalist, as their reservation counterparts suggest?

Elderly urban Indian informants express an almost universal ambivalence about remaining in the city. They are drawn, on the one hand, to the respite and familiarity that the reservation offers. On the other hand, city living is usually described as more convenient (although more expensive), as distances to frequent destinations are generally shorter, and there is a greater density of social activity to be found in the city.

Among those individuals who choose to remain living in the city, aging does not necessarily lead to more conservative political attitudes and behaviors. Under certain circumstances and on certain types of issues, the opposite clearly holds true, with individuals becoming more liberal, and even radical as they age. There is considerable evidence to suggest that older persons retain many of the political attitudes and orientations they developed earlier in their lives. Orientations deemed "liberal" in an earlier era--which constituted the formative years of political socialization for a contemporary aged-generation--may become socially defined as "conservative" as a person ages. To say that the stability of political orientations increases with age, however, is not the same as making the assertion that "with age, attitudes harden". There are several studies concluding that the aged are both capable and willing to alter their political views when circumstances suggest the need for such a change (Campbell and Strate 1981, Cutler 1977, Miller et al. 1980).

When one looks at the domain of specific issues, the view of older urban Indians as politically conservative or unflexible yields to a view of these individuals as becoming more pragmatic, stable, and moderate in their views with advancing age, regardless of whether those views were originally liberal or conservative in emphasis.

Contemporary attitudes towards government Indian policy, for example, may

be directly related to the circumstances surrounding earlier contacts that individuals have had with government agencies. Many of the elderly informants first came to Phoenix to attend the boarding school, which, at the time, offered a highly regimented daily routine designed specifically to achieve the goals of late 19th and early 20th century acculturation-oriented reformers. There was a nearly universal reaction of initial dismay at the unfamiliar prospects of militaristic discipline, prohibitions against native language use, and the great distances separating students from home and family. Acculturation-oriented government policy had clearly fallen out of favor in many quarters by the late 1920s and early 1930s, just about the time that this cohort of now-elderly informants was graduating from the boarding school, returning home to the reservation or remaining in the city, starting to work and beginning families of their own. Among this cohort are a number of individuals heralded as ethnic barrier crashers; that is, the first Indian to become a city church pastor, the first Indian to become a high school athletic coach, and the first Indian health care professional. These people are regarded by a generation of both whites and Indians as urban Indian community leaders, and acknowledgment of this leadership status clearly reflects attitudes that prevailed during an earlier acculturation-oriented era.

In the past few years, a local controversy has arisen concerning the disposition of the boarding school, which occupies an enormously valuable property in the heart of the metropolitan area's central business district, and which has experienced declining enrollments as reservation communities have increasingly insisted on retaining local control over educational opportunities. Several elderly urban Indian community leaders have been instrumental in marshalling support to keep the school operating. While their public arguments have a sentimental veneer, there is a far more pragmatic concern expressed over the ultimate beneficiaries of myriad leasing and pur-

chasing alternatives proposed for the property. It is difficult to label an individual who supports the boarding school's maintenance as "liberal" or "conservative." Instead, such support may be better characterized as reflecting a certain pragmatism and willingness to alter one's view of the boarding school when larger circumstances suggest the need for such a change.

While political attitudes and orientations are perhaps most easily revealed by the actions of elderly community leaders, there are other issues or areas of concern where pragmatism is broadly evident. On the subject of conjugal relationships, "conservative" and "liberal" as orientation labels impose misleading and restrictive connotations. One 78-year old Pima woman, for example, was married to her Maricopa husband for 40 years before being divorced 18 years ago. She recalled that her parents were quite disturbed by her choice of marriage partners, although somewhat mollified by his family's prominence. She divorced him when she was 60, and moved into the city so that the two children still living at home would be able to more easily attend vocational training classes, and so that she would be able to more easily seek employment to support herself. Of her seven children, one is married to a Hopi and living on the Hopi reservation, one is married to a Navajo and living on the Navajo reservation, one is divorced from a Pima from the other Pima reservation, and the other four are all married to non-Indians. When asked how she feels about having sons- and daughters-in-law that are all from different tribal backgrounds than her own, she replied:

> We get along alright. No complaints. I've never heard any of them say anything about it. And (the whites), we don't think anything of them, we just think of them as another Indian (laughter).

Political Interest

Another dimension of political activism is the level of personal interest

in political affairs. A common misconception concerning the elderly is that the level of political interest declines with age as part of a general process of gradual "disengagement" from active involvement with social life (Cummings and Henry 1961). Taken as evidence supporting this observation is the increasing percentage of people who, as they get older, answer "No opinion" to questions on political surveys, and the decreasing percentage of people who vote in local and national elections as they get older (Torres-Gil and Becerra 1977).

Political interest is closely intertwined with access to information about politics. It may be the case that there is nothing inherent in the aging process that dictates a decline in political interest, but rather a set of institutional obstacles that impede the flow of information, thus restricting an individual's ability to pursue his/her interests. Research from a variety of sources indicates that older persons follow political events more closely in the media (television, radio, newspapers) than is the case among younger persons. This high level of awareness has important implications for the development of activism among older persons. Older people have more available leisure time than other age groups. Watching televison is the single most time consuming activity among the aged in the U.S., and this has apparently been the case since television first came into widespread use in the the 1950s.

Elderly urban Indian informants have frequently mentioned television and an awareness of "what's going on in the world" as one dimension of contrast between daily reservation and city life. Television reception is poor in many rural areas of the Southwest, and cable access is unevenly distributed. In some areas electrical service is less than wholly adequate, and more than once I have been told of batteries running down at inopportune viewing moments. In unelectrified reservation settlements, residents go to great lengths to muffle

the intrusive noise from household generators, and informal understandings have developed among neighbors concerning appropriate hours for their use. Television programming generally reflects metropolitan concerns, with only one-half hour each week dedicated in Phoenix, Tucson, and Flagstaff stations specifically to Native American programs. Reporting in metropolitan Phoenix newspapers on Native American issues is restricted to spectacular crimes involving Indians, arts and crafts exhibitors, or tribal government affairs that impinge on the urban business community. That is not to say that reservation residents don't watch television, or that tribal newspapers and local radio stations constitute incomplete sources of issue-oriented information. I'm quite certain that the opposite is true. I am also struck, however, by the informants' perceptions that more information is available in the city. Heightened interest in political affairs, where it is observed, may be linked to this perception.

Increasing alienation and a sense of powerlessness among the elderly, where they occur, might also be taken as outcomes of gradual "disengagement" from social and political activities. Youth and elderly are often regarded similarly in terms of political alienation; both groups have been relegated to a marginal status by the dominant, middle-aged group. Both are assumed to have lower productivity potential--youth due to a lack of skills, the elderly due to lack of vigor. A sense of powerlessness is learned, however, and there is evidence to suggest that the experience of a lack of control over relevant outcomes in one's environment saps the motivation to respond to that environment. If aged persons are effectively denied access to important resources, the resulting sense of powerlessness will produce diminished levels of political activity. Conversely, those among the elderly who expect that their personal efforts can have an effect on political outcomes will be inclined to

participate actively.

Participatory Behaviors

Attitudes and opinions are at best indirect inputs into the processes of government and are thus likely to be limited in their impact. The fact that the elderly strongly favor improvements in local mass transit does not ensure municipal responsiveness to such sentiments. Government officials can easily ignore public opinion unless they are made to feel electoral pressures from elderly voters, or to witness political demonstrations staged by (or on behalf of) them. Active participation in politics by older citizens, whether by voting, membership in community organizations or political parties, protest activities, or office-holding can exert a much more direct influence on public policy than does public opinion alone.

Influencing public policy might be one consequence of participation, but elderly urban Indian informants appear to be motivated less by political outcomes and more by other factors. Prominent among these motivating factors are: 1) a desire to retain a sense of personal vitality and accomplishment; and 2) a deliberate choice to support an institution closely aligned with an ethnic category, thus using ethnicity, as Holzberg observes, as a "mitigating force or compensatory buffer, enabling older people to cope more easily" with the aging process (1982: 252).

A 62-year old Winnebago woman, confined to a wheel chair by progressively severe arthritis, described for me her year-long stint as a VISTA volunteer at PIC in 1980-1981. Having been chided into applying for the position by a friend grown weary of her complaints, she was certain that she wouldn't be accepted because she was in a wheelchair. Following quickly after the surprising notice that her application had been accepted was VISTA's request for her to join other successful applicants from all over (she would be the only

Indian, as it turned out) at the University of California--Irvine campus for a week's orientation. Her description of arriving at the destination airport and orientation week begins this way:

> Someone was there to meet me. You know, I never was so surprised. When I got there, they had six people in wheelchairs. One of them had a motorized wheelchair. She also had oxygen that she had to use. And I thought I was bad off. It put me to shame. Her little hands were withered, and her little legs, too. It makes you wonder "What can she possibly do?" But, you know, she had it here (points to head). She was so smart. In fact, I found out--in California they said she was on the board of several big--things, you know, and her mind was so good. Her otuput was so good. She sat up, and she came to this (orientation). And she was a little doll. Our last project on the last day was the public speaking, and she got up there and got (an award for being) the best. I don't think anybody was more deserving.

Her summary comment concerning her year as a VISTA volunteer:

> It was a wonderful learning experience for me. I enjoyed it. You know, when you get old, and you're crippled and everything, you think you're not worth anything. You can't do anything. And then you DO. All of a sudden you discover that you can do something. It makes you feel like "Well, I'm not so useless after all." I mean, it's so EGO-BUILDING!

Seeking to retain a positive sense of self-worth is, for older people, a motive to participate in political activities that is more or less independent of one's socioeconomic or ethnic background. However, the arena in which one chooses to participate may be much more heavily influenced by socioeconomic or ethnic characteristics.

It is of some importance to note here that metropolitan Phoenix has long been recognized as a destination for retirement-oriented migrants, with persons ages 60 years or older comprising an unusually high 23% of the total population. When one adds to this percentage the considerable group of retired military personnel who may be younger than 60, there is a substantial basis for the emergence of an age-group political consciousness, and the potential for common action as well. Elderly urban Indians constitute but a

miniscule portion of the region's total elderly population, and it may be that their choice of institutional arenas in which they participate politically is a choice that permits ethnically segregated interaction to promote an ongoing adjustment to old age. In other words, they use their ethnicity as a resource in coping with the problems encountered in the aging process. What is unusual is that this particular ethnic identity is relatively new. In just the past four or five decades, "Urban Indian" has emerged as an ethnic category among now-elderly reservation emigrants, complete with the development of institutions and associated activities in which one might participate, despite a wide array of tribal backgrounds represented in this category. These institutions and activities can be regarded as a response to both the urban, non-Indian elderly community and reservation communities, from which most elderly urban Indian informants have reported feeling equally alienated.

Life history data suggest, then, that the aging process is characterized by increasing pragmatism, stability of political orientation, the potential for heightened interest and participation in political affairs by elderly urban Indians living in metropolitan Phoenix. What is also suggested is that these characteristics of the aging process may have promoted the emergence of a pan-tribal ethnic identity among individuals from diverse backgrounds who have chosen to remain in the city. At the same time, this emerging ethnic identity has helped to define a sphere of interpersonal interactions in a manner that helps individuals cope with the decreasing physical vitality that is perhaps the most universally troublesome dimension of the aging process.

Life Histories and the Politics of Aging

Although it is not a theme that I have chosen to elaborate here, I think anyone who has worked with elderly people will acknowledge, as do the elderly themselves, that one's perceptions of death affect the life story that a

person tells. The meanings that one attributes to life experiences reside in both the past and the future. Especially as one grows older, the horizon of the future--death--becomes more clearly visible. After an extensive cross-cultural review of the structure of lives and the social ordering of personal experience, Langness and Frank (1981) suggest that one means of anticipating death, and reconciling oneself with it, is to create memorials for those who remain behind. In literate cultures, life histories are a way of doing this.

One must also acknowledge, however, that the act of compiling life histories is one of creating an articulated and coherent narrative, with a flow of images that arise in the consciousness of both subject and interviewer during periods of introspection. That is, we act on an urge to make coherent and socially acceptable account of ourselves (as ethnographers as well as biographical subjects) when we compile life histories. When looking back to earlier periods in our lives, most of us could identify the antecedents to any number of possible, but mutually contradictory life outcomes. Resolving contradictory themes in one's life story involves discarding some of these antecedents, or discounting their importance in the same sort search for continuity that is frequently associated with accounts by professionals in reconstructing their career choices, or by transsexuals (a different type of reconstruction is involved here) concerning their ultimate gender choices.

Given this inherent search for continuity in creating one's life story, there is a question of substantial interest to political gerontologists that may be recast in different terms. Many of those who study the politics of aging seek to resolve the conflict between "disengagement" and "continuity" models of the aging process. Some argue that although there is the demographic reality of a growing elderly population in industrialized societies around the world, the increasing magnitude of age-oriented issues may be

mitigated by the disengagement that is inherent in the course of aging.

More than half of the Indians in the U.S. now live in urban, off-reservation areas, and there is every reason to believe that the children of reservation emigrants who were born in the city will remain in the city as they grow older. As I have suggested here, life history data suggest--among now-elderly urban Indians, at least-- a continuity of political orientations as one grows older. Individuals who were "highly engaged" in political affairs may continue to be highly engaged; those who led less active political lives in their earlier years may be expected to evidence less activity in their old age. Moreover, many individuals who are perceived to be "disengaged" from active involvement in political affairs actually may have directed their interests and activities to a more or less exclusive inter-active sphere where these activities, by definition, are less likely to be noticed by outsiders.

In view of these observations, the proper question to pose is not one of whether social disengagement reduces the political significance of issues facing a growing elderly Indian population. Instead, we should perhaps focus our attention on designing policy and services planning institutions in a way that takes advantage of our knowledge concerning the use of ethnicity to promote successful adjustments based on a continuity of life patterns.

NOTES:

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1 An admittedly generous working definition of "activism" is implied here. I consider active participation by older people in politics to be reflected in voting, attendance at community organization- and politcal party-sponsored meetings or events, and elective or appointive office-holding. This covers a wide range of material and emotional commitments, but in a county where 72% of those eligible are registered to vote, and 56% of those registered actually voted in the 1982 general election, even voting seems to reflect an above average degree of activism.

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